

# Mary Walker

Only a few women earned medical degrees. Mary was one of them.

## ✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

What did Sherman mean by this comment?

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How have things changed since the Civil War in regard to women doctors? How are they the same? Are there professions today that are still seen as "men's work?"

## ✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you "nagged" your parents or teachers until you got it? Was Mary Walker's persistence a good thing or a bad thing? What would have happened if she just accepted that she couldn't help the army?

Standing only five feet tall, Mary was extremely unusual for her time. She attended Syracuse Medical College, where she was the only female student. She was considered "very unladylike" because she wore pants instead of dresses. General William T. Sherman once said to her, *Why don't you wear proper clothing? That clothing is neither one thing nor the other* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 49).

Mary Walker married one of her classmates, Albert Miller, and wore trousers to her wedding. (For this special occasion, she compromised and wore a dress coat over them.) During the ceremony, she refused to promise to be "obedient," and she kept her own last name (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 48). This was unusual for the time, and even many women would have been shocked by her actions.

Mary and her husband set up a medical practice together. After four years, the practice was doomed, and so was the marriage. In 1860, Mary opened a new office and ran an ad in the *Rome Sentinel* that read, *those who prefer the skill of a female physician to that of a male, have now an excellent opportunity to make their choice* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 49).

Unfortunately, Mary had to close her office because most people did NOT want a woman doctor.

When the Civil War began, Mary moved to Washington. After all, it's a war – the army will need lots of doctors – even women doctors, right? Wrong. Mary Walker pestered the Surgeon General for days, but he finally decided that as a woman, she was not allowed to go to the field hospitals since they were so close to the battlefields. Instead, she volunteered as a nurse in Washington and treated soldiers wounded at the Battle of Bull Run (Virginia). In early 1862, she offered to help at Forest Hall Prison in Georgetown, but because she was female, she wasn't allowed (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 49-50).

Mary was angry! She moved to New York and earned *another* medical degree. With two degrees from great schools, Mary went back to Washington thinking that she could get a military commission.

Mary had big plans, and being a woman was frustrating when it came to achieving her goals. Also, she disagreed with the medical community when it came to treatment methods. For instance, she believed that wounded limbs should be treated with intensive therapy instead of amputation.

General McClellan's aides wanted nothing to do with her, but still, she claimed to have served on the Fredericksburg battlefield under Union General Burnside. She was strong and opinionated, and she was always around, which got to be a sore spot to the high-level officials in Washington. They wanted her out of the capital, so Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sent her to Tennessee with a recommendation that she be made useful. She arrived after the Battle of



Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a field surgeon for the Union Army, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for her service during the war. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-8542

Chickamauga, and General George Thomas needed her skills so badly, he didn't care whether she was a female or not. Mary became a contract surgeon, which meant that she was a civilian working for the military. Her peers ignored or teased her. One doctor called her a *medical monstrosity* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 51).

When her contract was about to end, one of the military surgeons died. In September 1863, General Thomas made Mary an assistant surgeon for the 52nd Ohio. Within days, many of the members of the medical staff requested her dismissal, but no action was taken. Mary's peers shunned her, and even Confederate troops didn't think too highly of her either. Confederate Captain Benedict J. Semmes said that *We were all amused and disgusted at the sight of a thing that nothing but the debased and depraved Yankee nation could produce. [A woman] was dressed in the full uniform of a Federal surgeon. She was not good looking, and of course had tongue enough for a regiment of men* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 47). As her fellow Union doctors wouldn't let her do much, Mary began to treat the Southern civilians, whose doctors were serving with the Confederate troops.

On April 10, 1864, Mary was captured by a group of Confederate soldiers. She was held prisoner at Castle Thunder until she was exchanged. When she was released, she worked at the Women's Prison Hospital in Louisville and at an orphanage in Nashville.

After the war, Mary bothered every official she knew for a commission as a major. In January 1866, Congress offered her a Medal of Honor instead. Mary began to lecture about the benefits of wearing trousers, about her experiences in the war, and about women's rights. Still, she was viewed as a "freak" – a weird woman who "wanted to be a man." She was also criticized for campaigning against the use of alcohol and tobacco and for the problems associated with restrictive women's clothing (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 53-54).

In 1917, three years before women received the right to vote, the United States government asked Mary to return her Medal of Honor because it had not been received for actions performed under enemy fire. Mary refused to return it; telling them *You can have it over my dead body* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 54).

Even after being threatened with legal action, Mary refused to surrender her medal and wore it until she died in 1919. Thanks to her great-great niece, Ann Walker, President Jimmy Carter restored Mary's Medal of Honor on June 11, 1977 (Only Woman Medal of Honor Holder Ahead of Her Time).

In 1982, the U.S. Postal Service honored Dr. Mary E. Walker with a 20-cent first-class postage stamp. (View this picture by visiting [www.defenselink.mil/news/Apr1999/9904304d.jpg](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Apr1999/9904304d.jpg).) She was the first woman to act as an assistant surgeon in the United States military, and she was the first female to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

Name several ways that Capt Semmes' statement reveals the sexism of the time.

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Supposedly, the Medal of Honor was to be returned because it had not been received for actions performed under enemy fire. Do you think this was fair? Why or why not? Do you think any other (unspoken) reasons were to blame?

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How many women received the Medal of Honor after Dr. Walker?